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SUBJECT: AL HURRA MEETS WITH MINISTER OF INFORMATION

Sensitive but unclassified. Please handle accordingly.

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Al Hurra officials met with Information Minister Anas El Fikki to discuss options for broadcasting portions of a three-hour daily live television program from Cairo. Minister Fikki was adamant that all satellite transmissions for this program be transmitted from within Media City. Based on current licensing and construction requirements, the estimated date for actual broadcasting from a Media City studio is December 2009. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Middle East Broadcasting Networks President Brian Conniff and Al Hurra Director of Program Review and Research Vatche Sarkisian met with Information Minister El Fikki on August 6, 2008, to discuss Al Hurra's new three-hour daily live TV program. The proposed program is a news and lifestyle program with live broadcast segments from Dubai, Beirut and Cairo, with production coordination at the Al Hurra studios in Springfield, VA. The Minister did not comment on the program content, but was adamant that any satellite transmissions for this show originate from the Media Free Zone (Media City), repeating several times "Any transmission for this show that is not done through Media City would be illegal." This program concept had been previously raised several times with the Minister, but this was the first response from the Minister to either BBG representatives or Emboffs.

¶3. (SBU) Media City was established in the 1990s in an area west of downtown Cairo for independent and foreign broadcasters. However, television studios do in fact exist outside of Media City. For example, the Associated Press owns a television studio located in downtown Cairo, as do other video production companies. In addressing the distinction, El Fikki pointed out that these others are transmitting small segments of shows, such as sound bites and film footage of a few minutes duration. "Even if only one third of this program is coming from Cairo, then that is an hour, and that is not a segment of a program. It's a program and it must come from Media City."

¶4. (SBU) Conniff and Sarkisian met later that day with MFA Assistant Minister for North American Affairs Amb Hatem Saif El Nasser, who reiterated the message that all satellite broadcasting for this proposed program be transmitted from Media City facilities. El Nasser appeared to be well-briefed on the proposed program and repeated Min El Fikki's point that Al Hurra must locate production facilities in Media City. Conniff expressed his disappointment in the restrictive policy, which generated a nugget of advice from El Nasser. He reminded Conniff that in Egypt "all things are possible," but everything depends on relationships. He encouraged Conniff to set up shop in Media City, develop good relationships in Egypt and "see what might be possible" in a year or two.

¶5. (U) The following day, Conniff and Sarkisian met with the Head of the Media Public Free Zone in Media City, Mr. Effat Abdel Azim. According to Abdel Azim, the initial licensing

to operate in Media City is a one-to-five month process, at which point groundbreaking could occur to build a studio from the ground up. He noted that there is currently no available space for purchase, and he estimated a studio could be ready for broadcast by December, 2009. He left open the possibility that things might "work out later", after the licensing process is complete, saying that it may be possible to lease existing studio space at some point.

¶6. (U) MEBN President Brian Conniff did not have an opportunity to clear this message before departing Cairo.
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